

COMMENTARY

ISRAEL AND THE ARAB BLOCS

Rethinking the Question of Peace

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ARAB-ISRAELI relations are among those intractable international issues which one approaches with great reluctance. Over the last ten years so many articles, books, and letters-to-the-editor have been written, so many public declarations and statements issued, so many attempts made to bring about reconciliation, by governments and by the United Nations, by public bodies and by individuals—and the result has been precisely nil. If during 1948-49 there was a slender prospect of peace, the opportunity evaporated—Arab-Israeli relations went from bad to worse. The *ad hoc* treaties concluded in 1948-49 disintegrated piecemeal; other, secret agreements, initialed in 1949-52, were never officially adopted. The work of the United Nations Palestine

Conciliation Committee proved fruitless, as did the more modest efforts of such envoys as Dag Hammarskjöld or Eric Johnston (to secure agreement on a joint economic development scheme).

After a decade of vain efforts, it became clear that no basis for peace negotiations existed. The Arab countries categorically refused to recognize Israel in its present borders, and Israel just as categorically refused to accept the Arab minimum condition of the 1947 frontiers. Nor did Israelis believe that any substantial concession on their part would really result in a peaceful settlement; such a step, they feared, would be regarded by the Arab governments as the opening phase in the liquidation of the Jewish state.

Neutral statesmen, as time went on, became more and more chary of trying to initiate fresh negotiations: they were invariably met with strong resistance from one side or another, sometimes from both. In Israel the conviction grew that it had been a mistake to make so many peace offers, which the Arabs had always chosen to interpret as signs of weakness. If the Arabs desired peace, it was argued, they would say so; if not, normal relations could not be established by imploring them to sign a treaty—which would, in any case, be of doubtful value. By late 1955 a complete

Does the emergence of the anti-Nasser bloc of Arab states (described in last month's number by Ray Alan) strengthen the possibility of an Arab-Israeli settlement? WALTER Z. LAQUEUR considers this question in the light of the sorry record of intransigent hostility and fruitless negotiation over the past decade, while, in a companion piece following, Hal Lehrman reviews a major problem which has so far stood in the way of a settlement—the matter of the Arab refugees. Mr. Laqueur, a specialist on Middle Eastern affairs and a steady contributor to COMMENTARY, edits the bulletin *Soviet Culture* for the Congress for Cultural Freedom in London.

stalemate had been reached; during the following year, a mounting series of border clashes culminated finally in the Sinai campaign. At the time of writing, war and peace in the Middle East are still, as much as ever, in the balance.

It seems useless to speculate, under such circumstances, on the details of a possible peace agreement. Neither a "new approach" nor the most ingenious diplomatic formula would at present be of the slightest avail. The only thing that could make any radical difference would be a change in the general Middle Eastern political situation. At the moment, such a change appears to be developing. During the past year a virtual split has taken place between Egypt and Syria on the one hand and Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia on the other. If this split remains permanent, it may generate conflicts in the Middle East that will overshadow the Arab-Israeli dispute. In that case, problems which proved insoluble during the period when all the Arab states were united in single-minded enmity toward Israel might well be handled with comparative ease.

THE split in the Arab world seems to be of an enduring character, based on a clash of fundamental interests. Nasser and the Syrian colonels are determined to head an all-Arab federation, but they know now that this ambition can be realized only if the existing regimes in the other Arab states are overthrown. For not only are the oil-producing countries reluctant to share their revenues with the "have-nots," Egypt and Syria, but these countries are becoming more and more suspicious of the deepening dependence in Cairo and especially Damascus on the Soviet Union. The trend in Egypt and Syria toward some form of "popular democracy" persists, and this—with all that it implies in the way of Soviet influence in the Middle East—excludes the possibility of a lasting understanding between Nasser's group and their opponents.

Thus, though attempts at reconciliation (especially between King Saud and Egypt) will undoubtedly be made, they are unlikely

to succeed. Nor will the anti-Nasser states take Nasser's championship of Arab unity seriously, understanding as they now do what he means by unity.

Nasserism unquestionably has a wider appeal among the Arab masses than the monarchical autocracies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iraq. The masses, however, still have no stake in the political game which, in the Middle East, is played only by a small minority. This means that a determined ruler may stem the seemingly irresistible tide of Arab "national socialism" merely by arresting a few hundred leaders and militants of the opposition. Such a ruler could not hope by these means to hold the tide back for many years, but then Nasserism will probably not endure for many years, either. If the Egyptian and Syrian regimes should veer even more positively toward Moscow,* as seems likely, countervailing forces would inevitably develop elsewhere in the Arab world, and a totally new situation created, one about which it is too early even to speculate.

Be that as it may, for the next few years the struggle between the two Arab camps will in all probability overshadow the conflict between the Arabs and Israel. This must not be taken to mean that either Arab camp will be more favorably disposed toward Israel, or more inclined to make peace with her. On the contrary, a competition in intransigence is already on: Nasser and his propaganda chiefs denounce their foes in Beirut, Amman, and Baghdad for betraying the Arab cause by showing weakness toward Israel and conducting secret negotiations with her. The anti-Nasserites have hurled a counter-charge of weakness at Nas-

*Events in Syria are moving even faster than anticipated—and faster than intended by either Cairo or Moscow—and the rise last month of the all-out pro-Soviet elements to total dominance in the army may spell a widening of the split in the Arab world. Chances are that the new Syrian ruling clique will be represented as a group of "military reformers," much as Mao Tse-tung was once portrayed as an "agrarian reformer." But it is unlikely that any such attempt to play down the significance of Syria's latest internal explosion will succeed in fooling anybody vitally concerned.

ser for not attacking the Israeli ships in the Gulf of Aqaba. It is not, in fact, inconceivable that each side, and Egypt especially, may be contemplating a campaign against Israel as a means of restoring Arab unity under its own leadership. But for a variety of reasons no such campaign is likely to materialize, and if it did, it would prove to be a short-term expedient.

If the anti-Nasser camp are still talking about Israel as the "greatest threat to peace" in the Middle East, they have, nevertheless, slowly come to understand that it is not Israel but the Cairo-Damascus axis that is endangering their peace, and their very existence, too. Even in the Middle East real dangers are apt to prevail in the end over imaginary ones. Conversely, Nasser and Serraj may continue to use the Israeli "menace" as the main theme of their propaganda, but they fully realize that Israel is not the major obstacle on their road to supremacy in the Arab world. For the next few years every Arab leader will go on condemning Israel—all will declare that peace with her is impossible. At the same time, circumstances may compel them gradually to regard Israel as something other than their number one enemy.

II

THE story of the attempts to achieve some form of Arab-Jewish understanding over the last forty years has never been written. It is a sad story of omission and failure; in retrospect, one finds it difficult to see how there could have been anything but failure. The Zionist movement, not merely in its beginnings, but until quite recently, seemed to regard Palestine as existing in some sort of vacuum, as if, indeed, there were no Arab problem at all. For one thing, it underrated Arab nationalism, mistakenly interpreting all resistance to Jewish immigration as an expression of the fear felt by the Arab feudal lords that the immigrants were the harbingers of a social revolution. There were always minority organizations, such as the Brit Shalom, which took the Arab problem seriously, though it is doubtful that the

outcome would have been different even if the Zionist movement had heeded the advice they gave. For the truth is that those in the Jewish camp who strove for Arab-Jewish understanding never succeeded in finding anyone on the other side to conduct a dialogue with. Occasionally they would meet individual men of good will, but these did not pull much weight in Arab politics. So far as the Arabs were concerned, Jewish settlement in Palestine was an invasion, albeit a gradual one. All the talk coming from the Jewish side about mutual benefits and cooperation could not cover up the clash of basic national interests. The Palestinian Arabs had no reason to welcome the "invaders."

Faced with this hostility, the Zionists—who had originally ignored the Arabs—became more and more pessimistic about the chances of Arab-Jewish collaboration in Palestine. There was always the hope of approaching the rulers of the other Arab nations to help arrive at a settlement; but unfortunately for all concerned, the establishment of the Jewish state coincided with a great upsurge of Arab nationalism, and the neighboring Arab countries had no choice but to champion the cause of the Palestinians. Even the attempts to secure an understanding with King Abdullah—the least emotionally affected of the Arab rulers and the one least pressured by a public opinion hostile to Israel—failed. When Jewish representatives came to see him in 1948 just before the fighting started, he was already regretfully resigned to the idea of a war. After the armistice, new secret talks with Abdullah were launched and a far-reaching agreement was concluded and initialed in 1950. But it was never signed, for by that time public opinion even in Jordan would have rebelled.

In the years 1950 through 1954 unofficial secret meetings took place in Paris and Rome between Israeli representatives and men who were believed to speak in the name of all the Arab countries, including the new Egyptian regime. From these talks nothing of political significance emerged, perhaps be-

cause it was never quite clear whether and to what degree the Arab spokesmen had been empowered to negotiate. In 1955-56 the talks petered out altogether, and though there were occasional attempts by intermediaries to reopen negotiations, mutual distrust was by then too deep. Only recently, after the Sinai campaign, a new effort was made on the Israeli side to pave the way for further negotiations. Dr. Nahum Goldmann reported in July 1957 that he had been in touch with some Arab leaders and that he saw hope for the more distant future. At the same time, Israeli officials met Arab refugee representatives in Rome and negotiated a compensation agreement. In June and July some of the more irksome and irritating controls over the Arab minority in Israel were abolished. Generally speaking, Israel since Suez has displayed a fairly moderate attitude. All this is of course good news. But does it materially affect the prospects for an Arab-Israeli peace?

THERE has also been some fresh thinking about Arab-Israeli relations in recent months. The first issue of *New Outlook*, a monthly periodical (in English), was published in Israel in July 1957; it is devoted to "regional cooperation, to a peaceful and constructive solution to the problems of Arab-Israel relations, to the integration of Israel within the Asian-African world." The list of names on the masthead—editors, board of editors, and sponsors—is impressive. The real initiator of the magazine was the Jewish-Arab Association for Peace and Equality, an organization founded by Mapam in 1956 but including among its members representatives of every party except Herut and the Communists; and including also some prominent Arab citizens of Israel, such as Bishop Hakim and Elias Koussa.

New Outlook's statement of purpose is couched in very general terms, as such statements usually are: the sponsors and editors want it to serve as a "medium for the clarification of problems concerning peace and cooperation among all the peoples of the Middle East. It will strive to reflect those

aspirations and accomplishments in the economic and social and cultural fields that are common to all the peoples and countries of the area and could, given the elimination of friction and animosities, flourish and produce an ever greater abundance of well-being and happiness." The editors admit with disarming frankness that they have no specific solution for achieving peace and cooperation. This is a pity, for without specific solutions one does not as a rule get very far in politics.

New Outlook is characterized by great good will and very little hard thinking. Neither the editors nor the contributors have tried to answer the important questions: What groups in the Arab world should be approached? The present governments? And if so, all of them or only some? Or should one try to reach the Arab intelligentsia over the heads of the present leadership? And how could this be done? Nor has there been any attempt to suggest what might be offered to the Arabs as Israel's price for peace: territorial adjustments? settlement of the refugee issue, and along what lines?—and so on.

Instead, we meet the well-meaning but usual platitudes about the need to integrate Israel into the Middle East and the Asian-African world. (How "integrate" into a world in a state of revolution? Should Israel adapt to the Nasser-Syrian pattern or to the autocratic regimes of Jordan and Iraq?) In one article bearing on this problem, Mr. Michael Assaf, editor of *Al Yom*, notes quite rightly that Asians have no cause to regard their former rulers with feelings of inferiority. But as he goes on, his argument becomes somewhat questionable: "The Jewish people, originating in Asia, has proved in its European and American dispersion that there is practically no field or branch of cultural endeavour in which the Asian is incapable of achieving pinnacles of accomplishment." What does this signify in the context of 1957 and who is meant to be impressed?

Other writers stress, at considerable length, the community of interest between

Israel and the Arabs, pointing out that "the Arab movement for liberation has always had the sympathy of the Jewish National Movement"—which if true would be a unique phenomenon in history: between nationalist movements in neighboring countries (and *a fortiori* within a single country) there has never been much sympathy.

PERHAPS the most interesting articles in the issue are by Gerda Luft and Simha Flapan (the secretary of the "Jewish Arab Conference") and both are critical examinations of Israeli foreign policy. Mrs. Luft believes that a new approach is needed, based on the knowledge that military action cannot solve all problems of foreign policy; that common interests can be furthered once the Arabs are convinced that a flourishing Israel constitutes no threat to them; that Israel's treatment of its own Arab minority and Israeli contributions to solving the refugee problem will be decisive in any long-term settlement. Like Mr. Flapan, Mrs. Luft is strongly critical of the "beleaguered fortress" mentality which isolates Israel; she says that Israeli foreign policy must get rid of this complex—"not by military action but by gradually and patiently wearing down the barriers which separate it from its environment."

Mr. Flapan points out that the declarations of a desire for peace made by Israeli governments during the past decade do not in themselves amount to a policy of peace. He then lists three central developments of recent years which in his opinion were ignored by Israeli foreign policy: Soviet penetration into the Middle East, the rise of the Arab National Movement, and the retreat of colonialism in the area. He regards the drive toward Arab unity as a "determinate historical process," but also thinks that "the Arab National Movement's attempt to view the struggle against Israel as a necessary phase in its anti-colonial struggle is doomed to failure." For "there exists no real contradiction between Arab aspirations for liberation, independence and unity, on the one hand, and the existence of an inde-

pendent, sovereign Israel integrated into the Middle East area, on the other."

There is a curious lack of realism in all this reasoning, especially difficult to understand in Mapam leaders like Simha Flapan, who have read in their Lenin that crucial issues in the life of nations are always decided by force. The establishment of the state was an act of force, and Arab hostility was the inevitable result. This hostility cannot be explained away as an aberration or misunderstanding; it is a "real contradiction" between national interests if ever there was one. Mrs. Luft is of course absolutely right to demand equality for the Arab minority in Israel and a more constructive approach to the refugee problem. But it is quite unrealistic to suppose that such measures would affect the political situation to any great degree. The real issue for the Arabs is not the refugees but—as reading an Arab newspaper or magazine quickly reveals—the "Arab character of Palestine." Some commentators go further and argue that the refugee problem is no problem at all: "The nine Arab countries could solve it in no time by absorbing 100,000 each" (*Al Kahira*, Cairo, June 1957).

Mr. Flapan's observations about Israeli foreign policy are even less valid: there were few illusions in government circles about the gradual elimination of France and Britain from the Middle East. And what could Israel have done about Soviet penetration and Arab hostility? Mr. Flapan's colleagues in Mapam have gone to all the conventions and conferences of the Communist-sponsored "Partisans of Peace," including the one last June at Colombo in Ceylon, where they met with "progressive" Arabs. And a complete fiasco the Colombo meeting was. The Mapam delegates and the few well-meaning West European representatives found themselves outvoted on every issue: peace in the Middle East, the demand for direct negotiations between Jews and Arabs, and so on. They were given to understand that Russia and the pro-Communist elements in Asia do not want peace in the Middle East—a small point that had some-

how escaped their notice. And that was that.*

III

DESPITE the fact that under present circumstances nothing Israel can do is likely to affect the Arab stand, it would be dangerous to stop pursuing the question of possible grounds for a peace settlement. Are there any concessions that Israel can afford to make—politically, economically, and strategically—on the refugee and border problems that would at least create a willingness among the Arabs to discuss the issues at stake? Would the return of a sizable number of refugees to Palestine and resettlement of the rest in Arab countries with Israeli and international assistance be feasible? Has everything possible been done to enlist the help of those Asian and North African countries (from Morocco and Tunisia to India and Pakistan) which have recently given the Arab League important political and moral support? And what should Israel's approach be in the event that the split in the Arab world does indeed assume major proportions, even if only temporarily?

The argument that peace offers by Israel would merely be interpreted as a sign of weakness is not one that can be lightly dismissed: Arab governments, after all, have been known to react that way more often than not. But Israel now commands a position of strength, and will presumably hold it for many years to come; few responsible Arab leaders seriously believe after the Sinai campaign that military action against Israel would be successful. Thus there is, after all, far less likelihood than ever before that Israeli concessions will be taken for a confession of weakness.

But to what extent do Israel, the Arab

countries, and the big powers actually *need* a formal peace? Israel's own need for peace is psychological, rather than material. Its military, political, and economic position would not be greatly improved by a peace treaty; a comparatively big army, with all the expenditures involved, would still have to be maintained. And it must be remembered that the main difficulty facing the Israeli economy is not the Arab boycott, but the necessity to increase production and raise the standard of living. Israelis would therefore be ill advised to pin high expectations on a peace treaty; in some important respects they might even find themselves in a more difficult situation than before.

Against this weighs a very important psychological consideration: the desire to live in peace after years of struggle. If no peace treaty is concluded there may be a crack-up in Israeli morale which can lead to defeatism and emigration. Yet the psychological argument works both ways; how could this conglomeration of people from ninety countries ever become a nation without strong and constant outside pressure?

For their part, the Arab countries see no reason at all for making peace with Israel. Time, they feel, is on their side: they are forty million strong and more, and they can wait. The Arab countries may be backward today, but within a decade or two they are bound to be in a position to dictate practically any settlement, or destroy the Jewish state altogether. If these assumptions were correct, the Arab leaders would indeed be quite justified from their point of view in refusing to have anything to do with Israel. The truth is something else. Under their present leadership the Arab countries have made no spectacular progress in recent years, and what is more, they are unlikely to grow much stronger in the foreseeable future. Arab national socialism is very loud in its claims, but (if it should come to prevail in all Arab countries) it cannot provide the ideas and leadership needed to solve the enormous problems of the Arab world. Communist rule would be a different, a far more formidable proposition. But the victory of

*The interesting story of the Colombo meeting was related by the neutralist French editor Claude Bourdet in "*Discussion à Colombo sur la paix israélo-arabe*," *France-Observateur*, June 27, 1957. The Israeli delegates, including Mr. Israel Barzilai, minister of health in the Ben Gurion government, were subjected to personal attacks and vituperation.

Communist regimes among the Arabs would create a radically new political constellation; the defense of Israel would then automatically become (what it is not today) part of the Western defense system.

Even if the Arab assumptions of growing strength were sound, victory over Israel could be achieved only by concentrating on this one target to the neglect of most, if not all, other objectives. This could only mean that the Arab countries, which now have the opportunity to transform themselves into modern states and societies, would again miss the bus—miss, that is to say, the 20th century. Thus they would remain backward, not only in relation to Europe, but vis-à-vis many of the Asian countries which are making rapid strides forward through a constructive expense of their energies.

The Western powers obviously want peace in the Middle East, because they want stability, the preservation of the status quo. From their point of view, it is unfortunate that the order of the day—and for many a day to come—in that part of the world is change, not stability and continuity. Moreover, the contribution that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict would make to peace in the Middle East has been consistently overrated by the West. Though this conflict has been the most flagrant

source of tension in the area, it is probably not, in the long run, the most important.

As for Russia, its interest in Middle Eastern peace is strictly limited: Moscow wants to prevent a Middle Eastern armed conflict which may spark off a new world war. But short of that, Soviet policy can be confidently expected to exploit for its own ends, and if possible to intensify, all existing tensions within the area. Given this direct opposition of interests between Russia and the West, the talk about their alleged common stake in promoting peace in the Middle East seems to be quite illusory.

In short, the prospects for peace in the Middle East are still murky; the same problems continue to obstruct all efforts at reconciling Israel and the Arabs. The split between Egypt and Syria on the one hand and the anti-Nasserite Arab countries on the other holds out a possibility that problems which have been insoluble heretofore may eventually be cut down to size and handled with relatively little difficulty. There is as yet no cause for anything but a mild and very cautious optimism on this score. But there is also less point than ever in giving up all hope and regarding the conflict as permanently unmanageable, thus refraining from the need to rethink the basic issues.